



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

NOTES

HISTORICAL METHOD VS. HISTORICAL NARRATIVE

It is almost an axiom nowadays that "the present can be understood only with reference to the past." The general acceptance of this phrase is supposed to mark the triumph of the historical spirit and correlatively of the historical method. If this were true it would mean undoubtedly a great scientific advance. But to what extent is it true? Is there ground for the belief that the historical spirit and method, scientifically speaking, are comprehended by any large proportion of contemporary scholars and teachers? Are not the most evident results of the apparent dominance of the new ideal, at least in economics and closely allied disciplines, a great deal of misdirected and barren historical reading, and much indiscriminate indulgence in mere historical narrative?

As things go now, if a general theory of economics is to be exploited, it must be preceded by chapters on the development of English industry from the middle ages; if the discussion is one concerning capital and its uses, it must begin with an erudite consideration of the etymological development of terms; if a class is to be set to study contemporary municipal problems, it must first be made to drag slowly through the history of European municipalities; if a student undertakes to treat critically or constructively a bit of current theory he is likely to be regarded as unscientific and unscholarly if he fails first to read and summarize in a "historical part" all that has been written on the subject before. In fact historical narrative, masquerading as historical method, has become a fad. The truly scientific historical method is exemplified only here and there in the work of a few thoughtful scholars and teachers, and counts for little because its real character and significance are rarely comprehended.

It is difficult to realize just what the authors and advocates of this sort of preliminary historical narrative and study expect it to accomplish. The well-meaning but vague phrases with which they introduce it certainly do not enlighten us. Apparently they think and act in obedience, more or less conscious, to the modern scientific imperative which demands that things, as they are found, be

explained in terms of genesis and process. But, when one faces the question, how can these narratives contribute to any such explanation in any specific case? The historical narrative is "introductory;" it precedes the statement of any situation to be explained; its facts are neither selected nor arranged with reference to any specific problem. Apparently there is a vague idea that the "historical setting" is in some way endowed with the power both to evoke and to solve problems still unstated; and certainly no other supposition, in these days of multiplied interests, would justify the attempt to get at the meaning of any definite problem by first filling the mind with a mass of information, relevant and irrelevant, indistinguishably intermixed. The fact is that there is a vast difference between the historical method of science and this common, indiscriminate, historical narrative and study which is a travesty of it.

To understand the historical method and to make use of it in scientific work or in teaching we must first realize just what is the end of scientific investigation and how it is that an appeal to history can aid us in attaining this end. We are prone to think of scientific knowledge as an end in itself—to speak of the scientific spirit as simply a desire to know—to understand the existing situation—but is it not true that in reality all scientific investigation is undertaken in furtherance of some definite, vital, human interest? We wish to control the forces at hand so as to better realize some human purpose, therefore we seek to comprehend the existing situation from the standpoint of the purpose or interest in question. The scientific interest is therefore not merely academic but is in a sense practical—practical in the sense that it is an interest in understanding for the sake of the life of society or the individual. It follows that all scientific investigation is bound to be highly selective. We do not seek to understand the existing situation as a whole—that would be impossible—but we seek to understand the present in its relation to the interest at stake, the problem in hand. With this end in view we go as scientists to the past—to history—not to endeavor to "reconstruct the past," but for light on the practical problem before us. We go to the past in our scientific social studies because we recognize the fact that just as living individuals are not altogether what we see them to be in immediate thought and action, but are also bundles of suppressed and latent motives, propensities, and potentialities inherited, some of them, from a remote past, so social institutions are not merely what they can be shown to be by study of

their present structure and functioning, but are also what they are actually or potentially in process of becoming as the result of the operation of forces past as well as present. Hence it is, in a sense, true, that the present can be understood only with reference to *its* past.

The elements of the historical method, as applied to social science, ought to follow as a series of simple corollaries, from what has been said. The purpose of this method is evidently to further the solution of a definite problem though helping to explain a present situation—either the actual or some definite past institutional situation which is assumed for the purposes of study to be present. The problem presented is therefore specific, immediate, practical. The immediate historical question is: how did this situation come to be what it is? The data through which this question is to be answered are specific and selected; they are derived from its past as distinguished from the past of other institutions, or from the facts of general institutional history.

Clearly then the historical method in this connection presupposes a well-defined institutional situation—a descriptive account of what is or has been at some definite time—and the facts which it marshals out of the past in explanation of this situation are not general but refer specifically *to* this situation; they aim to show definitely its genesis and the process through which it came to be what it is. In other words, the historical method of science, as applied to economics and kindred subjects, requires that the problem first to be raised, that the situation as seen in the present first be stated, and that then, and not till then, solution of the question *why* be attempted by a careful study of the past out of which the situation given is supposed to have emerged.

With the simple exceptions of the character and source of its data, therefore, the historical method does not differ from the ordinary method of scientific investigation. The fact that we have to go to history for the data—to become in a sense historians—does not alter the scientific end and does not relieve us from the utmost exercise of our mental powers in hypothesis, analysis, discriminating selection, synthesis, and clear and logical statement. In other words, historical data are scientifically important only when they explain some matter of fact of vital interest to us. There is nothing sacerdotal about them. They have no importance merely because they refer to the past. Their importance is to be determined in any

given case by exactly the same tests to which ordinary data are subjected.

To bring out more clearly the contrast between the historical method as thus characterized, and mere historical narrative misapplied, let us take an example or two. Suppose the matter under discussion to be the comprehension of the present capitalistic organization. The pseudo-historical schoolman starts out with a sketch of the industrial history of England and then, having done supposed homage to the scientific spirit of the age, he proceeds to a close taxonomic treatment of the present situation, interwoven with good old-fashioned explanation of it in terms of the mechanical equilibrium of present forces—human motives and physical forces. Just what has the historical introduction signified here? The true exemplar of the historical method, on the other hand, starts from an analysis and description of the capitalistic system as an actual complex institutional structure upheld, for the moment if you please, by the mechanical equilibrium of present forces. Looking thus at the thing as it now appears, he asks the question *why*, in his attempt to better understand the situation from the standpoint of his peculiar interest, and then proceeds to answer the query by specific historical investigation. The whole difference in this case between the two methods is that we have, on the one hand, the mechanical juxtaposition of historical narrative and analysis of present phenomena and, on the other hand, the scientific solution of a definitely stated problem by means of appropriately marshaled data.

Or suppose we are endeavoring to make an earnest study of the present trade-union movement. If we were to follow the example and spirit of those who preface economic texts with historical chapters, we should feel it necessary, before getting acquainted with the ideas and methods of Samuel Gompers, John Mitchell, and Cornelius P. Shea, to plod laboriously up through the history of labor conditions and organizations from the dawn of the era of free labor at least. Actuated by the historical spirit, we should first try to get at the present situation—the ideas, ideals, aims, and methods of the present unionists. Then we should call in the aid of past experience to help us determine the sources and the life history of these present notions and methods of labor, and therefore, what as social and industrial institutions trade unions really are and are becoming, what their real relation is to the complex institutional situation of

the present, and therefore, as a corollary, how they are to be looked upon and dealt with for the best interests of society.

It must be admitted of course that the present is no more capable of being completely realized than the past is of being completely reconstructed. Attempts both to realize and to reconstruct are bound to be selective. Unless the interest in the realization of the present is superior to the interest that prompts to the attempt to reconstruct the past there is no ground for preferring the one attempt over the other. But the "historical narrative" interest is mainly academic, while that interest in the realization of the present which makes use of the historical method in harmony with modern scientific insight, is, as we have pointed out, in a sense practical—practical in the sense that it is an interest in understanding for the sake of or in the interest of the life of the society or the individual. The historical spirit in harmony with the modern scientific spirit or attitude is simply the going to the past to gratify the same interest that prompts to the attempt to realize the present. The main trouble with those who indulge in historical narrative is that they seem to think that academic reconstruction of the past can contribute to the ends of the practical interest of the present. In this they are for the most part mistaken. From the standpoint of the practical interest involved the academic reconstruction is a hopeless tangle of relevancy and irrelevancy, altogether without definite teaching.

In conclusion it may not be out of place to note that while the prefacing of the discussion of economic principles and conditions by long-drawn-out historical narratives violates the most vital rules of pedagogy, the historical method lends itself admirably to pedagogical needs if rightly understood. It gives the student something definite, something with which he is ordinarily, through experience or reading, in some degree familiar; it rouses his interest by asking: what, in terms of some vital human interest, does this situation mean? and then it invites him to search for the answer to this question. This harmonious relationship between the scientific and the pedagogical method, however, should not too much prejudice the new race of university investigators who affect to deprecate the pedagogical point of view as unworthy the consideration of the scientist.

R. F. HOXIE